

Demystifying Assessment Leadership

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Abstract

In a climate of accountability, the development of *assessment literacy* among school professionals has become critical to school success. The provision of *assessment leadership* is viewed as the means by which such literacy can be enhanced. The writers examine the conditions under which student achievement gains can be realized. Implications of assessment reform for the instructional leadership role are translated into the knowledge, appreciations and skills that can help principals transform *assessment leadership expectations* into *instructional leadership practice*.

Demystifying Assessment Leadership

Instructional leadership is generally recognized as one of the important roles of the school principal. Indeed recent research on the role of the principal has identified instructional leadership as one of the principal's central purposes. (Dufour, 2001; Fullan, 2003, 2001). As is the case with many aspects of education, the nature of the instructional leadership role, and the demands it places upon the principal (with accompanying expectations for principal effectiveness) have changed significantly in recent years. There have been numerous catalysts for this change, but among the more prominent has been the sustained emphasis among governments throughout the world on school accountability for student achievement. In an increasingly 'high-stakes' environment, the focus of attention has been the quality of leadership that can produce desired results. Turnbaugh-Lockwood (2005) framed the development in this way:

In the swirling wake of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, a vortex of educational changes now affects the way public educators at all levels conduct daily business. School principals, in particular, find themselves in a relentless public spotlight as they are held accountable for student achievement. This new accountability, of course, is measured by adequate yearly progress (AYP) requirements-coupled with increasingly stiff sanctions if all student subgroups do not meet established goals. (p.1).

More generally, the importance of leadership in securing sustainable school reform has been demonstrated in research and practice, while it is becoming increasingly apparent that the focus on student learning is a central element of the leadership mandate (Harris, 2002). What leadership actions might this imply? Cizek (1995) referred to the leadership of 'planned assessment systems' in which the beneficiaries of assessment are clearly defined; the uses of the assessment information are real, tangible and valued by the users; and the assessments are conducted in an efficient manner (ensuring, for example, that redundant practices are not reducing the time available for instruction).

In this article, we examine several critical implications of assessment reform for the instructional leadership role of the principal. Based upon an examination of what the research says to us about the meanings and dynamics of effective assessment and instruction, we identify some of the related, hitherto unanticipated, expectations for leadership. We frame these expectations in terms of sets of knowledge, appreciations and skills, which may serve as a focus for principal self-reflection and professional planning. Finally, we turn our attention to the issue of the supports necessary for principals to be successful in what, for many, represents a formidable and ambiguous aspect of their instructional leadership role.

Managing the Meanings

Before we get further into this discussion, some clarification as to what we mean by several of the key terms needs to be provided. In particular, the ideas of *assessment reform, assessment literacy, assessment leadership, and instructional leadership* require elaboration.

The term *assessment reform* is used rather broadly and it typically refers to teachers' use of performance-based assessment or other types of authentic or alternative assessment. Writers such as Stiggins (2002, 2001), and McMillan (2001a, 2001b), have articulated the principles and practices of classroom-based assessment reform. This has been a significant element of the school reform movement over the past decade or more (Stiggins, 2002, 2001; Eisner, 1999). In particular there has been a focus on improving student learning outcomes and in measuring student academic achievement (McMillan, 2001a, 2001b, 2003). We should point out that assessment reform is not concerned

solely with accountability systems. Rather, it encompasses the variety of assessment orientations and purposes that serve both summative *and* formative ends, or, as Stiggins (2003) suggests, assessment *of* learning and assessment *for* learning.

Assessment Literacy refers to the levels of knowledge, appreciations and skills held by key individuals and groups concerning assessment processes, alternatives and uses. Fullan (2001) defined assessment literacy along the lines of three aspects of ‘capacity’:

- The capacity of teachers and principals to examine student performance data and make critical sense of them (to know good work when they see it, to understand achievement scores, to disaggregate data to identify subgroups that may be disadvantaged or under-performing).
- The capacity to develop action plans based on the understanding gained from the aforementioned data analysis in order to increase achievement.
- The corresponding capacity to contribute to the political debate about the uses and misuses of achievement data in an era of high-stakes accountability.

Assessment literacy has influenced teachers’ classroom practices and “...[c]hanges in classroom assessment represent a major paradigm shift in thinking about learning, schools, and teaching.” (Hargreaves, Earl, & Schmidt, 2002, p.70). This has encouraged teachers to employ a broader, more student-involved approach to classroom assessment, typically characterized as assessment *for* learning (Stiggins, 2002, 2001) or as assessment to improve learning (Guskey, 1994, 2003). The potential and the problems of assessment literacy have been well documented by Terwilliger (1997), Cizek (1995) and others.

In an era of accountability (McEwen, 1995) *assessment leadership* is one of the most significant demands on instructional leadership in schools. In fact, increasing attention is being devoted to the focus on *learning* as the central goal of instructional leadership. In general, there has been a shift in emphasis from the supervision of *teaching* to the supervision of *learning* as the nexus of school leadership activity (Glickman, 2002; Stoll et al., 2002), and several researchers have focused on the related curriculum leadership and assessment leadership implications for the principal's instructional leadership role.

The concept of *instructional leadership* was defined in 1984 (Liu) as consisting of "direct and indirect behaviors that significantly affect teacher instruction and, as a result, student learning." (p. 33). Similarly, and more recently, Hopkins (2001) pointed out 'that the prime function of leadership for authentic school improvement is to enhance the quality of teaching and learning.' As we have noted, an emerging aspect of this function is the increasingly visible and increasingly 'high-stakes' consideration of student assessment.

Assessment, Instruction and Leadership: Messages From the Research

Assessment principles and practices used by teachers and administrators have been influenced by assessment reform. The primary focus of those principles and practices has been on two aspects of assessment: i) *large-scale assessment* and ii) *teachers' classroom assessment strategies*. Large-scale assessment is a significant factor both for improving student learning and for accountability by policy makers and includes a variety of international, national, and local/regional tests. For example, the Programme

for International Student Assessment (PISA) is an international large-scale assessment developed by OECD and used in many countries for language, mathematics, and science assessment. Other large-scale assessments are used on a nation-wide basis, for example the National Assessment Project (NAEP) in the United States and the School Achievement Indicators Project (SAIP) in Canada. In addition, state/provincial authorities have developed large-scale tests for use in particular areas.

Classroom assessment (that is, curricular-based grading and assessment practices used by teachers) has been the subject of numerous studies. The primary purpose of these studies has been to document the grading and assessment strategies used by teachers and to consider the 'best practice' elements of those strategies. Authors such as McMillan (2001b), Ross, Hannay, & Hogaboam-Gray (2001), and Noonan & Duncan (2004) have examined current classroom assessment principles and practices and developed profiles of teachers' practices. Although large-scale assessment and classroom assessment have traditionally been kept separate, more recent studies have begun to consider whether the two ideas should be more integrated as a way to improve assessment literacy among teachers and policy makers. (McMillan, 2003). Other assessment issues, including the role of formative assessment practices such as peer and self-assessment, have also focussed attention on the role of assessment in improving student achievement. (New) The work by Black et. al. (2004) provides a framework for operationalizing formative assessment in the context of assessment reform. Subsequent studies by Noonan and Duncan (2005), McDonald and Boud (2003) and others have pointed to the important of peer and self assessment as an important component of classroom assessment.

Although much of the recent research and development in assessment reform has focused either on classroom assessment or on the use of large-scale assessment, the role of the school principal in this critical area has been largely ignored. However, the recent focus on the concept of assessment literacy has drawn attention to the importance of school-level leadership in incorporating the formative and summative orientations to assessment as a principal's responsibility (Stiggins, 2002, 2001; Eisner, 1999).

There is little doubt that the instructional leadership role of the school level administrator has increasingly assumed an element of assessment leadership. Cizek (1995) pointed out that as leaders of education systems, administrators cannot neglect the role of assessment. "The only critical question remaining," he noted, is *how* administrators will be involved." (p. 248). In his conceptualization of contemporary leadership for learning, Glickman (2002) placed assessment content and methods firmly at the center of elements that influence student learning. He suggested that educational leaders require the tools to improve classroom instruction, including a focus on what to attend to in improving teaching, observing classrooms, using achievement data, and considering samples of student work.

There seems to be little question that expectations and prescriptions for the roles of teachers and school administrators are changing significantly. This has led to a more widespread realization that achievement gains are maximized in contexts where educators increase the accuracy of classroom assessments, provide students and parents with informative feedback, and involve students deeply in classroom assessment practices. It was not surprising, therefore, that the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) incorporated in its standards the expectation that the school administrator

promote the success of all students by advocating, nurturing and sustaining an instructional program conducive to student learning (Green, 2001).

Stiggins (2002) advocated a requirement that all teacher and administrator preparation programs ensure that graduates are assessment literate in terms both of promoting and documenting student learning.

On this note, research by Murphy (1995) indicated that three instructional leadership processes undergird reform initiatives at the school level: (1) defining and sustaining educational purpose, (2) developing and nurturing educational community, and (3) fostering personal and organizational growth. Similarly, Harris (2002) identified several instructional leadership practices that emphasize the centrality of instruction and learning within the school, among which are a strong sense of mission, a shared vision, and the development of learning communities.

New Demands: New Leadership Expectations

One of the effects of educational reform over the past decade has been to raise the profile of classroom assessment. In part this has been because attention has been directed to large-scale and standardized testing, national and international, to encourage accountability and to improve learning. Cizek (1995) posed the question: “Who will assume leadership within schools for coordinating the big picture of assessment reform as part of general educational reform?” (p.249). Thus today there is a need to consider the role of assessment leadership as an expectation of contemporary instructional leaders.

What is expected of the instructional leadership provided by principals in this environment? Some useful guidance has already been provided in the literature.

Glatthorn (1997) provided considerable detail on the principal’s role in shaping what is to

be taught and tested. Hargreaves (2001) and others emphasized the need for instructional leaders to help teachers reconcile the demands for high stakes testing with ongoing professional assessment of the development of individual learners. According to Lingard et al. (2003) the leading of learning requires “the development of spaces within schools to discuss ways in which classroom practices (assessment and pedagogy) can be used to promote productive performance” (p. 24).

Extending Cizek’s (1995) perspective, the above ideas relate to an *assessment leadership* role for principals, a significant part of which is the expectation that they promote high levels of assessment literacy among school professionals (Fullan, 2000). This in turn has implications for an educative role for principals in nurturing assessment-related professional development. From a school-wide perspective, this would entail an orientation to assessment leadership that emphasizes continuous improvement with the objectives of aligning school expectations, providing regular feedback on student learning, and promoting thinking about classroom strategies for enhancing learning.

More recently, Philips (2005) added insights into the leadership and supervisory actions required in order to enhance general levels of assessment literacy in the school. These include supporting professionals, assisting individuals to set goals and adjust instructional strategies to reflect assessments, developing understandings of how to improve performance by maximizing effective use of performance data, and exploring various types of data and their uses (p.2). Further, Girvin (2005) viewed the instructional leadership role as one that promotes the school’s goals and objectives with a view to enhancing student achievement. She organized the principal’s actions into three broad categories: *the principal as visionary* (establishing practices in keeping with broader

perspectives and issues), *the principal as organizer* (working to develop an action plan with related goals and timelines) and *the principal as cheerleader* (conveying support, through personal visibility and involvement in reviewing student assessments and related achievements).

In light of the above, assessment leadership as a role of the principal represents a daunting set of expectations. Cizek (1995) noted that no one person will possess the complete perspective on the assessment needs of the school, asking, “How could an administrator possibly hope to acquire the big picture, to get a handle on assessment activities, or to promote a coherent vision for assessment? In our opinion, the most promising responses to this challenge have been offered by *distributed leadership* orientations inherent in professional learning communities research (DuFour & Eaker, 1998) and investigations into the development of collaborative cultures at the school level (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996; Glickman, 2002). The distributed leadership philosophy is based upon a rejection of the paragon fallacy (leave it all to the leader) and accepts the reality identified in the above comment by Cizek; in other words, school transformation is too large a task for one person (Lashway, 2003). It needs to be, as Lambert (1998) has suggested, embedded in the school community as a whole, focusing change as a collective concern, rather than an individual one. What does this mean for the instructional leadership role, and for assessment leadership specifically? It entails involving others in decisions, allocating important tasks to teachers, and rotating leadership responsibilities. It involves collective learning around instruction, together with effective modelling of expected learning orientations, the development of expertise

among members, and the ability to identify where the expertise and the leadership potential lies. (Elmore, 2000).

Requisite Knowledge, Appreciations and Skills for Effective Assessment Leadership

From the foregoing discussion, several ideas consistently emerge that constitute basic prescriptions for principals as they go about understanding and enhancing the in-school assessment leadership aspect of their role. What areas of *knowledge*, *appreciations*, and *skills should* principals possess in order to be effective in this area?

Knowledge would include at least a familiarity with alternative approaches to assessment, including recent practices and processes. In order to understand, and enter into, the debates around assessment, a basic knowledge of the make-up of standardized tests, and what they actually measure, would seem to be important, as would knowledge of test construction and design. Of course, the foregoing presuppose a realistic reading of one's own levels of assessment literacy, and a sound knowledge of the ways and means by which it can be raised.

Popham (1995) underscored the importance of these knowledge requirements, noting that knowledge of measurement and principles of test development are basic requisites. He made the observation that principals do not need to be wizards at developing tests, but they should know enough about test development to help teachers with the tasks of development, scoring and interpretation. Specifically, knowledge of the *measurement-inference-decision* sequence, and knowledge of the distinction between *norm-referenced and criterion referenced tests* is vital to put principals and their schools in a position to enhance the instructional utility of assessment. (Popham, p.39).

Among the critical *appreciations* is that of the importance of *assessment leadership* as a core function of instructional leadership in contemporary schools. At the heart of this point is the admonition that the principal be committed to leadership in this area, rather than abdicating it, delegating it, or relegating it to the status of a peripheral function. The role of classroom and student context in determining what is to be taught and tested is also an important appreciation, as is the value of student work as an indicator of what students know and can do. On a related note, we consider the appreciation of the integral relationship among teaching, learning and assessment to be an important antecedent to effective assessment leadership.

Critical to our earlier discussion of distributed leadership is the appreciation by principals that they cannot undertake the responsibilities for assessment leadership alone, and that the expertise of all professionals as a community of leaders and learners needs to be harnessed. The principal, in this sense, works to “weave together people, materials and organizational structures in a common cause” (Lashway, 2003, p.1).

Undoubtedly, some school professionals hold inappropriate or mistaken beliefs that constitute serious inhibitors to the effectiveness of the connections among teaching, testing and learning. This is indeed a powerful argument for the clarification and discussion of assessment beliefs in a collaborative environment, perhaps with the articulation of an *assessment vision* for the school in mind. Stiggins (2004), for example, posited four ‘productive’ beliefs that might guide the assessment vision of a school:

- *That high-stakes tests, without supportive classroom assessment environments harm struggling students;*
- *That students are crucial instructional decision makers whose information needs must be met;*

- *That the instructional decisions that have the greatest impact are made day-to-day in the classroom.*
- *Teachers must possess and be ready to apply knowledge of sound classroom assessment practices.*

Additionally, one would also expect the discussion of such beliefs among school and system administrators to be a natural accompaniment to school-level deliberations.

The specific *skills* implied by this discussion include the skills of engaging teachers in reflective dialogue about classroom assessment practices, gauging levels of assessment literacy, initiating school and classroom-level action plans based upon student data, debating the value of alternative assessment practices (including accountability-driven measures), determining existing classroom practices, and promoting wide-ranging discussion of assessment practices and beliefs.

Much of what is dealt with in these comments can be addressed through an approach to *instructional reflection* and mentorship that accords priority to focused attention to assessment methods and processes. Certainly, there is no shortage of valuable frameworks to guide such activity. Specifically, McTighe & O'Connor (2005) provide seven classroom assessment practices to enhance teaching and learning (namely, using summative assessments to frame performance goals, showing criteria and models to students in advance, conducting diagnostic testing before teaching, offering appropriate choices to students in demonstrating their learning, providing feedback early and often, encouraging student self-assessment and goal-setting, and allowing new evidence of achievement to replace old evidence). Likewise, the framework for assessing learning prescribed by the California Standards for the Teaching Profession (cited in Glickman, 2002) is a valuable guide to discussion and assessment planning.

We would also suggest that *honest self-reflection concerning the assessment leadership role* is a necessary skill for principals. It is a skill that is very much needed if schools are to move beyond the simple rhetoric of accountability toward continuing critical examination of individual and collective assessment literacy. Toward that end we put forward the set of statements for focused self-reflection in Table 1. This is, admittedly, simple and far from comprehensive, but it represents a point of departure, an initial catalyst for the technical, descriptive, critical and contextualizing elements (Hatton & Smith, 1995) that can make reflection meaningful.

Structuring for Support

We have observed that assessment leadership can constitute a daunting set of expectations for principals, who are already very much hard-pressed by the impacts of numerous curricular and structural reforms, capricious political agendas, and changing roles of parents and community groups in relation to the school. We believe, however, that authentic and clear assessment leadership can make sense of much of what is on the political and professional agenda, and can assist the school and its constituent communities in more effectively addressing the learning mandate. On the other hand, principals who ignore assessment reform and its leadership implications do so at the peril of those for whose learning they are responsible. We turn, with this in mind, to the matter of what *supports* can and should be available to principals in their pursuit of leadership excellence in this aspect of their responsibility.

Programs of principal preparation have a significant mandate to provide relevant preparation related to assessment leadership, and we consequently repeat and endorse the call made by Stiggins (2003) for programs that are geared to graduating new teachers and

administrators who are assessment literate in the promotion and documentation of student learning.

Given the changing nature of this field, and the emerging insights contributed by teaching, learning and assessment research, ongoing professional development for principals and teachers is of paramount importance. System-level leadership has a critical role to play on two fronts: a) keeping current on new developments in assessment research and practice; and, b) mandating, supporting, and organizing (where appropriate) relevant individual and organizational professional development on those new developments and related skills.

The current environment of accountability has served to highlight the ‘accountability without authority’ frustration experienced by many incumbents of the principal’s role. The Association of Washington School Principals (Barker, 2005) formed a task force to examine issues of responsibility, accountability and authority in a system increasingly driven by student performance. Among the sources of support and authority needed by principals in performance-based systems with student achievement as the main focus of principal accountability, the task force cited:

- Authority to select teachers based upon proven performance with student achievement;
- Authority to appropriately respond to building data;
- Authority to direct finances toward student achievement goals;
- Authority to direct staff development funds;
- Authority to make alternative placements for high-risk students. (p.8).

On a related note, the existence of an enabling and visible system policy on assessment (preferably expressed as an integral element of the system’s vision) is a fundamental source of support for principals. Well conceived and logically framed, it can

provide valuable parameters for the actions of in-school leaders; it can give affirmation to assessment as an essential function; it can provide a rational basis for principal interventions regarding assessment practices in classrooms; it can provide a logical basis for the supervisory role; it can reinforce expectations for classroom professionals regarding assessment; and it can provide irrefutable proof that the work of principals in relation to assessment is informed and transparent, rather than capricious and arbitrary.

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Table 1: Assessment Leadership: Focused Self-Reflection for Principals

Assessment Leadership Knowledge

1. I have a high level of familiarity with alternative approaches to assessment.
2. I have a sound knowledge of the principles of construction of achievement tests.
3. I am familiar with recent ideas and practices related to assessment.
4. I have a good understanding of my own assessment literacy.
5. I know where to access current information and support concerning assessment practices.

Assessment Leadership Appreciations

6. I believe assessment leadership to be a core aspect of instructional leadership role.
7. I believe teaching, learning and assessment to be integrally linked processes.
8. I have an appreciation for the role of classroom and student context in determining what is to be taught and tested.
9. I have an appreciation for the value of student work as an indicator of what students know and can do.

Assessment Leadership Skills

10. I can engage teachers in reflective dialogue about assessment practices.
11. I can effectively gauge levels of assessment literacy among the teaching professionals in my school.
12. I can initiate, in collaboration with teachers, school and classroom level action plans based upon student assessment data.
13. I can support teachers through an approach to instructional supervision that incorporates assessment methods and processes.
14. I can enter into meaningful debate about the relative value of alternative assessment practices (including accountability-driven initiatives, and the most appropriate forms of assessment-based evidence).
15. I have the ability to adequately determine existing assessment practices in the classrooms of my school.
16. I can promote discussion of assessment practices and beliefs, beyond the immediate school environment.
17. I have the ability to conduct continuing critical examination of my own assessment literacy.